



COMMUNITY ACTION

Johnston: Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency continues youth homeless fight



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2015 marks the 50th anniversary of Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency, an organization rich in history and founded on the premise that self-sufficiency is attainable through programs designed to provide resources and education to our citizens struggling with poverty. Over the last half-century, CSCAA has offered a myriad of programs that have empowered thousands of families in Cayuga and Seneca counties

to make positive changes in their lives and stem the tide of poverty.

Agency programming is often geared toward a specific need or age group. The first youth program implemented at CSCAA specifically targeting the teen/young adult population was the Neighborhood Youth Corp. This program was established through BOCES and funded in 1965 as a War on Poverty program. The agency assumed operation in 1970 and ran the program for nearly three decades with funding through various federal job training acts. At its height, over 300 disadvantaged youth were placed at 75-plus municipal and nonprofit job sites throughout the county. Participants were provided real work experience, vocational training, career counseling and other supportive services. Youth employment services are now offered through the Cayuga Works Career Center.

Another program administered by the agency that focused on the teen/young adult population was Take a Step Ahead. TASA was created through the Teen Age Services Act of 1984 as a comprehensive case management program for pregnant, parenting and at-risk teens ages 10-22. The program was funded by Medicaid and staffed by a team of case managers who worked with local youth to address a variety of needs that left them vulnerable to dropping out of school, substance abuse, pregnancy and involvement in the juvenile justice system, to name a few.

CSCAA operated the TASA program across both Cayuga and Seneca counties for nearly 20 years, serving hundreds of local youth and creating long-lasting partnerships with area schools and other human service agencies all working toward a common goal. That common goal was providing better opportunities and resources for youth who were at peril of falling through the cracks. The TASA program worked; it consistently demonstrated success with youth in such areas as pregnancy prevention, improved academic outcomes and increased graduation rates, increased job-related skills and employment, and decreased involvement in the juvenile justice system and a decrease in

dependence on public assistance. TASA ended in 2011 due to state funding cuts and has yet to be replaced in either Cayuga or Seneca counties. At the time of its closure, over 120 disadvantaged youth were enrolled in TASA, all working toward self-identified goals within a framework of positive youth development.

Another program geared toward at-risk teens/young adults was the Male Mentoring program. Launched in 1998 in partnership with the Cayuga County Reduce Adolescent Pregnancy Coalition, this program provided after-school activities including individual mentoring, abstinence/sex education, vocational training, employment, community service and recreation opportunities to teen males aged 10-19 in Auburn, Moravia and Port Byron. Program funding was cut in 2006 and has not been replaced; nearly 100 young males were enrolled at the time of closure.

As is often the case in the nonprofit world, programs may be lost, but another equally essential program may take its place. In 2011, the agency received funding to operate the New York State Supportive Housing Program for Young Adults. NYSSHP funding was sought out by the agency due to the alarming increase in homelessness in Cayuga County among 18-25-year-olds, initially identified by TASA program case managers in their work with older youth. NYSSHP currently offers transitional housing to homeless young adults without dependents for up to two years in a college suite-style setting. Program participants, referred through a number of local organizations, receive safe housing, case management and the chance to stabilize their lives while working on self-identified goals. NYSSHP provides services to nine individuals at a time and, to date, has served nearly 50 young adults experiencing homelessness; the program is generally full and often has a waiting list.

In a perfect world, TASA, Male Mentoring, NYSSHP and/or similar programs would be available and accessible to our at-risk youth population, working in tandem to ensure that as a community we have a continuum of resources to serve this vulnerable group. CSCAA continues to work with partners such as the Auburn Cayuga County Homeless Task Force, the Cayuga County Department of Health and Human Services, the Runaway Homeless Youth Committee, the Cayuga Works Career Center and our local school districts to develop additional resources that can assist the teen/young adult population gain the skills and confidence needed to become successful, self-sufficient adults.